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ABSTRACT

This study examined stress, strain, and coping mechanisms in women religious leaders. Subjects were nuns (N=51), Reform women rabbis (N=45), Episcopal women priests (N=32), United Methodist clergywomen (N=45) and Presbyterian clergywomen (N=45), matched for age and years on the job and pulpit assignments. All subjects were given the Osipow and Spokane Occupational Environment Scales, Personal Strain Questionnaire, and Personal Resources Questionnaire, and the specially devised Religion and Stress Questionnaire. The results showed that female rabbis had the most stress and strain and the least number of coping devices, followed by the ministers, and then the seminarians. The nuns, the historically oldest and most traditional group, had the least stress and strain and the greatest number of coping mechanisms. While all clergywomen thought women were blamed for being in nontraditional work settings, rabbis realized this more than did Methodists or Presbyterian clergywomen. Clergywomen preferred to use their birthnames and more gender-fair language, with rabbis leading in this. Understanding these results may give greater insight into how to lower stress and strain and to increase personal coping resources among women religious leaders. (Author/ABL)

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# WOMEN RELIGIOUS LEADERS AND STRESS

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# WOMEN RELIGIOUS LEADERS AND STRESS

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## Original Abstract

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This study examined stress, strain, and coping mechanisms in women religious leaders. Subjects were nuns (N=51), Reform women rabbis (N=45, almost the total population of 46 in the USA and Canada with pulpits at the time of the study), Episcopal women priests (N=32), United Methodist (N=45) and Presbyterian (N=45) clergywomen, matched on age and years on the job and pulpit assignment. All Ss were given the Osipow and Spokane Occupational Environment Scales, Personal Strain Questionnaire, and Personal Resources Questionnaire, and the specially devised Religion and Stress Questionnaire. The Religion and Stress Questionnaire suggests why these women were stressed, and the Osipow and Spokane scales tell how they are stressed and strained and how they cope. Female rabbis, the least traditional group, have the most stress and strain and least amount of coping devices. Next come the ministers, and then the seminarians. Lastly come the nuns, the historically oldest and most traditional group, with the least stress and strain and the greatest amount of coping mechanisms. The nuns are equally activist and feminist. Nuns, as seminarians, live in communities but have done so longer and among other women and thus would not have directly experienced the stress and strains of coexisting on a coed seminary campus. Nuns would have a chance to better develop an "old girl network." Female rabbis and ministers are most at risk on stress and strain, then On the Religion and Stress Questionnaire, rabbis had higher means than Methodist clergywomen in seeing female seminarians as having higher needs to excel than the males ($<.05$); they were higher than Episcopal ($<.001$), Methodist ($<.05$), and Presbyterian ($<.001$ clergywomen in perceiving that women do not have equal opportunities for job recruitment and hiring in religious settings. While all clergywomen think women get blamed for being in nontraditional work settings, rabbis realized this more than did Methodist or Presbyterian clergywomen (both at $<.001$ level). Clergywomen prefer to use their birthnames and more gender-fair language, with rabbis leading in this. t-tests and ANOVAs are used. (Supported in part by a Grant from the Educational Foundation Program of the American Association of University Women).

# WOMEN RELIGIOUS LEADERS AND STRESS[1]

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Introduction:

While Roman Catholic nuns have been on the scene for quite some time, clergywomen are rather new to the religious establishments. Nuns, who most usually have worked in schools and hospitals, are traditionally viewed within the Roman Catholic Church as more laity than clergy or even as almost the same as laity. In any event, until very recently nuns were not perceived by Catholic religious professionals (priests) or by their male counterparts, brothers, nor by Catholic parishioners as equal to or competitors of the male hierarchy in title, role, or any function within the church. In contrast, Protestant and Jewish clergywomen have most often been regarded as challengers to the male patriarchs within their settings, as going against the traditions of the established religious mores or beliefs.

What do these differences in roles and perhaps role-models mean in terms of stress, strain, and coping mechanisms in nuns and clergywomen? Do nuns experience less stress and strain than clergywomen because they are seen as less iconoclastic? Do clergywomen sense more backlash from conservative members of their religious groups or become stressed because the work structure is geared to the male religious experience or expressions of spirituality? This study attempted to answer some of these questions by examining stress in women religious leaders.

[1]This study is supported in part by a grant from the Educational Foundation Program of the American Association of University Women.

Methodology:

Subjects: The Ss were nuns (n=51); Reform women rabbis (n=45, almost the total population of 46 women rabbis in the USA and Canada with synagogue or Hillel pulpits at the time of the study); female Episcopal priests (n=32); United Methodist clergywomen (n=45); and Presbyterian clergywomen (n=45); and female seminarians (n=36) drawn from United Methodist and Episcopalian seminaries. Ss were matched on age, years on the job, and, in the case of the clergywomen, on pulpit assignment.

Procedure: All Ss were administered the Osipow and Spokane (1981, 1983) Occupational Environment Scales, Personal Strain Questionnaire, and Personal Resources Questionnaire. These are paper-and-pencil questionnaires in which Ss indicate their perception of the stress, strain, and coping resources present in their lives. They were also given a 16-item Religion and Stress Questionnaire (Rayburn & Richmond, 1982), especially designed for studying stress in religious professionals; this questionnaire allows not only the "yes" and "no" response but also essay-type explanations. In each group studied, 10% were interviewed in a structured fashion for further clarification of their stresses.

Findings:

While the Osipow and Spokane scales tell how the religious professionals were stressed and strained and how they coped with their stress and strain, the Religion and Stress Questionnaire suggested why these women were stressed, It should be noted that the Osipow and Spokane scales were not normed on religious professionals, and as with other existing questionnaire-type tests they were limited for use in the religious professionals population.

One-way ANOVAs were used to match the groups of clergywomen on age, years on the job, and pulpit assignment. t-tests were used to measure differences between sub-groups.

Nuns, the most traditional group in terms of sex-role, as well as the oldest group historically, had the lowest scores on overall stress and strain and the highest score on overall personal resources for coping with stress and strain. At the other end of the continuum were the female Reform rabbis, the least traditional group. The rabbis had the highest overall score on stress and strain and the lowest overall score on personal coping resources. For overall stress scores, the next-lowest to the nuns were the female seminarians, followed by the Episcopalian priests, then the Presbyterian ministers, and United Methodist ministers occupying the next-to-the-highest position. For next-to-the-lowest overall strain score came the Episcopalians, then the United Methodists, then the Presbyterians, and the next-to-the-highest were the female seminarians. In terms of personal coping resources, from lowest to highest were the rabbis, the Presbyterians, the seminarians, the Episcopalians, the United Methodists, and the nuns.

When the extreme scoring groups were compared, the nuns scored significantly lower than the rabbis on Role Overload, Role Ambiguity, and Total Occupational Environment Scale (all at $<.001$); nuns were significantly lower than rabbis on stress from Role Boundary, and on Vocational, Psychological, and Interpersonal Strain (all at the $<.05$ level). Further, the nuns were significantly higher than the rabbis on Physical Coping, Rational/Cognitive Coping, and on Total Personal Resources Questionnaire (all at

the $<.001$ level) and lower than the rabbis on Responsibility and on Total Personal Strain Questionnaire (both at the $<.01$ level) and higher than the rabbis on Recreation as a coping resource ($<.01$).

The rabbis were higher than the Episcopalian clergywomen on Role Boundary and Total Occupational Environment (both $<.01$) and on Vocational Strain ($<.001$) and on Role Overload ($<.05$) and Psychological Strain ($<.05$). However, the rabbis were lower than the nuns on Social Support and Total Personal Resources Questionnaire (both at the $<.01$ level), and lower also on Physical Coping and Rational/Cognitive Coping (both at the $<.05$ level).

When the Episcopal and Presbyterian clergywomen were compared, the Presbyterians were higher on Vocational Strain ($<.001$) and on Role Boundary ($<.05$) and lower on stress from Physical Environment ($<.05$). Presbyterian clergywomen were lower than rabbis on Role Overload ($<.01$), stress from Physical Environment ($<.05$), and Interpersonal Strain ($<.05$). While United Methodists had more stress from Physical Environment than the Presbyterians ($<.05$), they also had better Physical Coping resources than the Presbyterians ($<.05$). Episcopalian and United Methodists had only one significant difference on the Osipow and Spokane scales: On Role Boundary, the United Methodists had significantly more stress than the Episcopalians ($<.01$).

On the Religion and Stress Questionnaire, the rabbis had significantly higher means than United Methodist clergywomen in perceiving that female seminarians have greater needs to excel than their male counterparts ($<.05$). The rabbis scored lower than the Episcopalian ($<.001$), United Methodist ($<.05$), and Presbyterian

($<.001$) clergywomen in perceiving that women do not have equal opportunities for job recruitment and hiring in religious settings. While all clergywomen think women get blamed for working in non-traditional work settings, rabbis realized this less than did United Methodists or Presbyterian clergywomen (both at the $<.001$ level of significance). Clergywomen prefer to use their birth names and more gender-fair language, but rabbis lead in birthname preference: When compared to Protestant clergywomen as a group, the female rabbis preferred to use their birth name to a significantly higher degree ($<.001$) and were more likely to perceive their religious setting as accepting of women's use of their birth names ($<.05$)

Nuns were less sensitive overall to issues concerning stress over women's participation in religious leadership positions than Protestant clergywomen and the female rabbis. In general, nuns were only more sensitive to these issues when compared to female seminarians on women's need to excel more in seminary than their male counterparts / and in perceiving more than the seminarians that women are treated as a novelty to be tolerated in seminary. When compared to the female rabbis, the nuns were more apt to see female leaders in predominantly male enterprises as getting blamed for defying the establishment ($<.001$); were more apt than rabbis to see women experiencing stress from institutional and personal pressure in work, and themselves as women in their work, in more positive than negative ways ($<.001$); and nuns were less positive than rabbis about using less gender-bound language in church/synagogue texts and hymnals ($<.001$), in planning to use more inclusive language for men and women when they work in their religious setting ($<.001$),

and less positive about women congregants and clergywomen using their birth names (<.001). Next to the most insensitive to the stress of women religious professionals were the seminarians.

Among the Protestant clergywomen, the United Methodists were were less sensitive than the Presbyterians to women's not having equal opportunities for recruitment interviews and actual hiring on church/synagogue staffs (<.01). On this issue, Episcopalian clergywomen were more sensitive than the United Methodists (<.01). The Methodists were more likely to see their setting as accepting of women's using their birth names than were the Episcopalians to so see their setting (<.05). Further, the Methodists more preferred using their birth names than did the Presbyterians (<.05). Episcopalians were less sensitive to the blame aspect of women leaders than were Methodists (<.01) and Presbyterians (<.05).

Discussion:

Although many of the nuns expressed activist and even feminist leanings, they still project an image of subservience, traditional female role, and subordinate functioning, especially in the eyes of Roman Catholics. While seminarians often live in communities, nuns live in communities with other women and for longer periods of time, While nuns would not have to coexist on a coed seminary campus and thus to experience the stress and strains that such living might entail, they would have a much better chance to develop an "old girl network." With this background, it is not surprising that nuns demonstrate the lowest stress from occupational environment and lowest strains overall, as well as the highest overall personal coping resources. However, compared to other women religious professionals, nuns were less sensitive to issues about

women which might be subject to stress and strain in a still non-feminist world. It is quite possible that, given growing interest in groups which promote the idea of a priesthood inclusive of women, such as the Women's Ordination Conference, nuns must wander between two worlds---the traditional and the contemporary---as concerns the role of women in religious leadership. They may need to deny or suppress much of what is happening in today's world to survive within the framework of their religious establishment. In terms of changes in language, nuns were the least apt to be offended. However, they were also the least positive in planning to personally use inclusive language in their work or to favor gender-fair language in church texts and hymnals.

Seminarians, clergywomen-in-training, have not yet gotten out in the full-time work-force as religious professionals. It is not surprising, then, that they experience next to the lowest overall occupational environment stress. However, they experience next-to-the-highest overall personal strain and on most of the individual measures of strain. They occupy a middle position in terms of overall personal coping resources. Along with the nuns, female seminarians were an insensitive group toward stresses concerning women religious professionals. Perhaps they too have a need to deny and suppress their frustrations and anger in having to function in a patriarchal system still not totally accepting of the equality of women in the religious establishment. Goldsmith and Ekhardt (1981) reported that women seminarians were stressed by the unrealistic expectations which others place upon them. Further, Hardesty (1979) suggested that attitudes and overall language in seminary become more sexist as the numbers of women in seminary grows, and then both women and men develop greater stress.

The Female Reform rabbis perhaps have the image of being the least traditional of women religious professionals. The rabbis experience the greatest degree of overall occupational environment stress, as well as stress from Role Overload, Role Insufficiency, and Role Ambiguity (they had the highest scores in these areas) and in Responsibility and Role Boundary (in which they scored next-to-the-highest). In terms of personal strain, the rabbis had the highest scores again. They were the group most at risk, since they also had the lowest score on overall and on individual measures of personal coping resources. Much is expected of them by their congregations, and their overload causes much stress. As a group, these rabbis were fairly sensitive to stresses caused by prejudicial attitudes toward women clergy. The rabbis seem to be more open about their thoughts and feelings and more prepared to deal with their stresses and strains but they do not experience the social supports (including role-models) and recreational/relaxational coping necessary to lower such stress and strain.

Among the Protestant clergywomen, the Episcopalian and Presbyterian women occupied the middle position for occupational environment stress and the United Methodist and Presbyterian women were middlemost in overall strain. However, in coping resources, the United Methodists were next-to-the-highest, the Presbyterians the next-to-the-lowest, and the Episcopalians the middlemost position. Of this group, the Episcopalians were the highest on Role Overload, Interpersonal Strain, Social Support and Rational/Cognitive Coping. The United Methodists were highest on stress from Responsibility, Physical Environment, and overall occupational environoment difficulties, and on Recreation, Physical/ Coping, and overall personal coping. The Presbyterians were highest

in Role Insufficiency, Role Ambiguity, Role Boundary stress, and Vocational Strain. After the rabbis, the Protestant clergywomen were the most sensitive to stresses of women functioning in a biased religious setting. Most likely, being out in the religious marketplace and having gotten through seminary, they have given up some of their idealism and optimistic hopes and dreams of men and women functioning together as equals in religious leadership positions. They have probably accepted a certain amount of stress and strain of having to exist in such an environment, in which they often have to prove themselves daily to congregants (who may refuse to have clergywomen celebrate the Eucharist) or to senior pastors (who may see them as competitors and inferiors). Perhaps there is a certain amount of resignation for the time being, while they await better times when clergywomen will be more appreciated by all. Considering the fairly recent entrance of the female Episcopalian priests in the clerical marketplace, it is rather noteworthy that they showed less stress than the United Methodists and the Presbyterians and less strain than both of these other groups as well. They had better coping resources than the Presbyterians but not as good as the United Methodists. Presbyterians had more sensitivity about stress caused by women not having equal opportunities for recruitment interviews and hiring on church staffs than did the Methodists, and they sensed more than did the Episcopalians that women leaders in predominantly male-centered jobs often get blamed for going against the traditional. The Episcopalians were more sensitive to women's having unequal chances for job opportunities but less sensitive about the blaming of female leaders than were the Methodists. Otherwise, the clergywomen were about the same in such sensitivities. Understanding these awarenesses may give us greater insight into how to lower stress and strain and to increase personal coping resources.

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